

Soldier becomes combat vet before gaining citizenship

By Spc. Allison Churchill

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“I always wanted to be a part of something good,” said Pfc. Katty Zelaya soon after receiving her first combat patch, that of the 4th Infantry Division.

Zelaya, an orderly room clerk for 589th Brigade Support Battalion, Fires Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, came to the United States from Honduras in 1991 when she was 14. Zelaya’s grandmother had lived in Miami for 40 years and wanted her daughter and granddaughter there with her.

Zelaya says she planned on starting work on her citizenship after being in the United States 5 years. But she was inspired by two aunts already in the Army and joined the military first.

Right now she’s working on her documentation and has been told she could be a citizen by March.

“It should be automatic,” said Capt. Brett Wheeler, commander, Co. B, 589th BSB, of the process of those willing to serve the country to become citizens.

Zelaya has been serving her new country in more ways than she expected. She trained to be a chemical operations specialist, but when she was assigned to 589th BSB, a newly created unit, she also took on the role of orderly room clerk.

Her leaders say she rose to the challenge.

“Pfc. Zelaya has performed to a higher degree than her pay grade,” said 1st Sgt. William Tucker, Co. B., 589th BSB. “She is filling a sergeant slot and working in the training room as a company and training room clerk.”

“We’re well postured for any chemical attack,” said Wheeler of Zelaya – adding that he hopes the company never needs the chemical emergency skills of his “exceptional Soldier.”

Wheeler also praised a skill that makes Zelaya an asset in the personnel section.

Zelaya, who speaks English almost more fluently than some natural-born Americans, said she took a year of English before coming to the States, but it wasn’t the same as the everyday language used.

“I understood it sooner than I could speak it,” she said, adding that in Miami, Spanish is as common as English, making it easy to revert to her first language.

Like learning a new language, Zelaya said serving in such a young unit has been difficult, but rewarding.

“It’s tough because we’re starting from scratch,” she said. Receiving a combat patch for helping the unit stand-up and deploy holds great meaning for Zelaya.

“I feel more attached to the country,” she said.